Proposed projects to improve inclusivity and equity in Astronomy outside of Departments

Consideration area: State of the Profession

Authors: A B

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Key Issue and Overview of Impact on the Field

Discrimination, harassment and bullying of students in Astronomy Departments are still happening, as well as a lack of inclusiveness, and other issues. This not only negatively impacts these students, but the overall scientific contributions in the field and the overall Departments are also impacted. The issue should be addressed because it will allow for more engaged and content students, which, in turn, increases scientific inquiry and discovery. Academic departments only benefit from thriving graduate populations. Often, universities, and, in some cases, departments provide reporting and other resources. However, sometimes resources available in universities are not sufficient for a variety of reasons (e.g., this is well described in [3], [4], [5]; there are more examples, not all of which are publicly available, and some of these examples in particular happen in Astronomy Departments). Previously, “AAS Task Force on Diversity and Inclusion in Astronomy Graduate Education” (see [1]) was published, and listed recommendations for Departments. However, although many universities would likely try to follow these recommendations, this still does not imply that the recommendations would be followed in all universities, and that all people in a position of power would be ready to make a change, or to accept that there is/was harassment in their Departments. In order to provide more support to students, and to speed up the change, we propose to create additional external resources, mostly for graduate students, which would be provided by other organizations outside of departments or universities.

Strategic Plan

We propose to provide reporting-related resources outside of universities; to help connect students who experienced harassment, discrimination or other issues; and to encourage some changes in addressing issues.

I) Reporting-related resources outside of universities:
We propose to fund a (separate from universities) reporting option where a few “intake people” (defined in the same way as in the “AAS Task Force on Diversity and Inclusion in Astronomy Graduate Education”, Appendix VIII) would be hired by an external organization that students could contact if they do not feel comfortable reporting to the department or university. These intake people would try to support the students, to provide resources, and, when possible, to take other additional action.

Especially if there is a harassment of an individual by an authority, other authorities, may decide to protect the respondent. Sometimes, the reporting resources could choose the same, and might not always protect the privacy of the information. Although this is not happening all the time, it is not clear how often it occurs, and ideally this should not be happening at all. To mitigate this problem, we propose to provide additional reporting-related resources, especially to graduate and undergraduate students, and that these resources are provided by an external organization,
whose goal would include supporting students. This organization may be AAS, or some other organization, that would be unbiased towards people on authority position. The resources could include a few (or more, if needed) intake people whose role would be similar as described in the AAS Task Force on Diversity, and would include enabling other people to anonymously report harassment and bullying, if they feel that there is a lack of resources in their universities.

More precisely, the goals would be to:
1) Provide support to students who experience issues (discrimination, harassment, bullying, or other issues that significantly impacted them), when the students feel that they do not have such resources in their universities. In some cases, there might be resources, but these resources (or a majority of them) might be biased.
2) Provide information and explanation of the process and resources that are available outside and inside of universities.
3) Providing assistance to help with the reporting processes.
4) Take other actions, that would be possible for them to take.

II) Help connect students who experienced harassment, discrimination or other issues:
We also propose to provide ways that students who experience harassment or other issues could connect with each other, share their experiences, and try to help each other. One of the easiest methods to connect would be via Skype or similar softwares, and, when possible, in person. This would help that such students feel more supported, are more aware of the reporting-related resources, and that the process is less stressful, less time-consuming, and less unclear.

III) Encourage some changes in addressing issues:
With a goal that issues (e.g., harassment, discrimination, etc) are not left not addressed, and to improve the efficiency in addressing issues, we propose addressing issues in all cases, including cases when such issues are reported by only one person. We also propose addressing bullying, harassment, discrimination, and other issues in all cases, including cases in which it is not clear if these issues are based on a protected category (for clarification, see methods described in [2], including “... finding direct evidence is rare; most recipients are circumspect enough to avoid making overtly discriminatory statements. As a result, most Title VI litigation and administrative investigations focus on circumstantial evidence.”). We also propose increasing awareness by campus advocacy programs, and taking other steps that would help address issues more effectively.

We hope that the proposed changes would be useful to both students and faculty, and would help improve equity and inclusion in Astronomy departments.
References: